

Media Release

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Psychological barriers reduce responsiveness to bushfire risk

'*Bad things do happen, but to someone else*' and '*The world is a safe, fair, predictable place*' are two of the beliefs that prevent people from taking adequate precautions before bushfire seasons, even when they are advised to take action by Government and emergency services, according to Australian psychologists.

Addressing the psychological obstacles to preparing for bushfires is vital in order to get people to be prepared and act on advice, said Professor Bob Montgomery, President of the Australian Psychological Society.

Professor Montgomery said traditional approaches to behaviour change have generally relied on trying to scare people into taking the steps to reduce their risk and increase their safety but often this approach didn't work as people were inclined to discount the risk.

Very early in life we learn basic beliefs that protect us from the potentially over-whelming anxiety that could come from the fact that humans think, said Professor Montgomery. We can think about possible disasters even when they are unlikely or impossible. Anxiety-reducing ideas include, '*Bad things do happen, but to someone else*', '*If I am a good person life will be fair to me*', '*The world is a safe, fair, predictable place*'. None of these is actually true but without them we could be crippled by perpetual anxiety.

These ideas are useful but can be an obstacle to our preparing for risks that are real, maybe imminent. To take the recommended precautions against fires, or any natural disaster, you have to admit to yourself that you are, in fact, at risk. This makes us anxious and so it often may seem easier to ignore the risk.

Professor Montgomery said that evidence collated after every major disaster showed that the impact of such events was greatly intensified by the fact the majority of people at risk had taken few, if any, of the recommended precautions.

If we really want people in areas at risk to do more about reducing their risk and protecting themselves, then our practical guidelines must be accompanied by practical advice on how to manage the anxiety that will inevitably come from taking precautions, he said.

He said the Australian Psychological Society has a brochure that tells people how to do this, giving practical suggestions on how to manage their natural anxiety while doing their long-term preparations and how to prepare psychologically on high risk days, when a threat is imminent.

For information on managing risk related anxiety and bushfire preparedness, go to the APS website - www.psychology.org.au - click on the 'Bushfires' link under Psychology Topics, and download the Psychological Preparedness Brochure.

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The APS is the largest professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 17,500 members. The APS is committed to advancing psychology as a discipline and profession. It spreads the message that psychologists make a difference to peoples' lives, through improving psychological knowledge and community wellbeing.

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